

## The Antislavery Movement in Iowa

James Connor

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the *De Kalb* Lieut. Commander Walker. The *Chouteau* [Choctaw], Lt. Comdr. Ramsey, the *Romeo*, *Petrel* and *Forest Rose* all under command of Lt. Comdr. Breese, up the Yazoo to open communication in that way with Gens. Grant and Sherman. . . . In the meantime Lieut. Comdr. Walker in the *De Kalb* pushed on to Haines Bluff which the enemy had commenced evacuating the day before, and a party remained behind in the hope of destroying or taking away a large amount of ammunition on hand.

When they saw the gunboats they came out and left everything in good order. Their guns fell into our hands.

The works at Haines Bluff are very formidable. There are 14 of the heaviest kind of mounted 8 & 10 inch and 7½ inch rifled cannon, with ammunition enough to last a long siege. As the gun carriages might again fall into the hands of the enemy, I had them burned, blew up the magazine and destroyed the works generally.

I also burnt up the encampments which were permanently and remarkably well constructed looking as if the rebels intended to stay for some time. The works and encampments covered many acres of ground and the fortifications and rifle pits proper of Haines Bluff extended about a mile and a quarter. Such a network of defenses I never saw. The rebels were a year in constructing them and all were rendered useless in an hour.

So it was that a single news release incorrectly gave credit to the gunboats for the capture of Haynes Bluff. It was the 4th Iowa Cavalry that deserved the recognition.

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## THE ANTISLAVERY MOVEMENT IN IOWA

by James Connor  
Des Moines, Iowa

*Mr. Connor is a graduate student at Drake University. The following is the first portion of a two-part article which examines the evolution of Iowa's attitudes on the great moral controversy of slavery. It is an edited version of Mr. Connor's master's thesis in American History.*

Part II of "The Antislavery Movement In Iowa" will appear in the fall issue of the *Annals*. Sources will be given at that time.

## Part I

If one predominant thread could be picked from the tangled skein of social and political preoccupations in the middle decades of 19th century America, that thread would probably be the slavery controversy. No State or territory, no citizen, no level of government could escape involvement with the question. It served as a focus for national issues. Americans inevitably examined such problems as internal improvements, foreign policy and territorial organization in light of their effects on the various sections of the country; and at the root of the basic sectional dilemma was the economic, political and social reality of the slave system.

Men might attempt to escape entanglement in the whole issue, but lasting immunity was totally impossible. The question had an appalling habit of following in the train of any territorial immigration, and it proved itself a hardy traveler, dropping roots easily in virgin land. In few territories was this inevitable insistency of the slavery controversy so graphically exemplified as in the early history of Iowa. This State was pulled irresistably into the very vortex of the great contention, no matter how much its citizenry might wish to avoid it.

## THE PROBLEM THROUGH OTHER EYES

The land comprising Iowa, resting between the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, was long the uncontested domain of various Indian tribes. It came into the territorial claims of the United States as part of the extensive Louisiana Purchase, and as such, it immediately and unavoidably became involved in the slavery question.

The entire Louisiana Territory fell first under the jurisdiction of the governor of Indiana, and as that area was part of the Old Northwest Territory and thus expressly forbidden to house slavery, the natural assumption was that the new land would likewise be free-soil. Such an assumption was quickly proven untenable, however, since the institution already flourished in the French-settled delta lands at the mouth of the Mississippi. In 1804 a commission of judges under Indiana's Governor William Henry Harrison

met in St. Louis to divide the huge new acquisition into districts. This commission, viewing slavery's entrenchment as a *fait accompli*, ruled that the entire territory was open to the system.

Thus, from its inception, Iowa was involved in the slavery question, and this long before any white man ever dreamed of settling there. However, 1804 was not a year of agitation over the expansion of the South's "peculiar institution," and Americans gave little thought to the implications of the decision rendered by Harrison's commission. Not until 1820 and the passage of the Missouri Compromise would the question of slavery in the Louisiana Territory surface as a source of contention. That landmark decision determined the nature of Iowa's early settlement. Missouri gained admission to the Union as a slave-state and all the land north of 36 degrees 30 feet, an area including Iowa, was declared free. However, the solution provided by the Missouri Compromise was largely academic since Iowa still remained virgin territory.

Then, in September 1832, Black Hawk, the charismatic rebel chieftain of the Sac and Fox Indians, suffered defeat at the hands of an American force under General Winfield Scott, and was pressured into signing away a slice of his tribal lands along the west bank of the Mississippi River. This fifty-mile-wide strip was opened to white settlement on June 1, 1833, and once the restless American immigration began, the Indians were pushed inexorably back.

For the first three years of Iowa's frontier history, Michigan Territory exercised jurisdiction over it. Then, in 1836, this parent territory achieved Statehood and the reins passed to Wisconsin. On July 4, 1838, Iowa gained territorial status in its own right, and Statehood followed on Dec. 28, 1846.

During the entire period of settlement and evolving political autonomy there was no apparent question of Iowa's official attitude on slavery. The Missouri Compromise dictated Iowa to be free-soil, and its settlement proceeded accordingly. Yet the involvement of the frontier settlers could not be so easily disposed. Iowa received



immigrants from all sections of the country, and these pioneers brought their home-grown attitudes with them, regardless of any predetermined political arrangements. Furthermore, the whole concept of Negro bondage was far more complicated than a simple "thou shalt" or "thou shalt not possess slaves in this land."

The Missouri Compromise simply could not dictate men's attitudes, and attitudes are the agents which determine a people's response on any moral and social question. The key, then, to understanding the nature of Iowa's involvement with the slavery question lies in recognizing the dominant attitudes of the population at large throughout the State's entire antebellum history.

Previous students of this subject have settled rather unanimously on a single thesis, which Joel Sibley best expressed in his article, "Proslavery Sentiment in Iowa, 1838-1861." Basically the position of Sibley and his colleagues was:

Iowa's antebellum history can be divided into three different eras. During the first period, lasting until about 1846, great support for slavery existed; in the second period, lasting until 1854, the state underwent a transition; in the final period Iowa took its place in the roster of antislavery states. This gradually changing opinion was due in the main to the make-up of the population.<sup>1</sup>

Basically, this represents the body of historiography on the subject. The position taken was that Iowa moved from proslavery to antislavery sentiments between 1833 and 1861. This shift occurred because Southern immigrants, who initially influenced State attitudes, came gradually to be displaced by more abolitionist-minded settlers.

All these variations on the theme of early Iowa being a haven for proslavery attitudes hinged on the contention that Southern-oriented settlers initially dominated the population. The only departure from this line of thinking came with the additional note by Sibley that the nascent proslavery outlook was also influenced by the fact that, until the coming of the railroads, Iowa's only reliable outlet for goods was south down the Mississippi.

<sup>1</sup> Joel H. Sibley, "Proslavery Sentiment In Iowa, 1833-1861." *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, LV (October, 1957), 289.

Reputable historians would not endorse this theme of population shifts determining an attitude shift without offering proofs to support it. They do, in fact, submit considerable evidence.

The first evidence was the recorded nativity of the State's earliest territorial representatives. When Iowa District was a part of the Wisconsin Territory, that parent area allowed it 18 delegates to the territorial assembly. In 1836 Iowa held its first election and chose those 18. Eight of the men selected were from free States, eight were former slave-state residents and two were from Ireland. More importantly, four of the eight free-staters came from the border States where a man's position on slavery might lean either way. That Iowa's first electorate chose predominantly Southern-born delegates, for Sibley and company, suggested an estimable Southern population in the area.

In addition to the examination of the lineage of Iowa's first representatives, some historians, notably F. I. Herriott, chose to offer the nativity of its territorial governors as another deductive proof of their thesis. There were only three chief executives in Iowa during the territorial period, Robert Lucas (1838-1841), John Chambers (1841-1845), and James Clarke (1845-1846). Herriott, however, noted significantly that the first two, Lucas and Chambers, were Southerners, Virginia and Kentucky respectively.<sup>2</sup>

In further support of the thesis alleging Southern influence in early Iowa, established historiography offers the election of senators as additional evidence. The first two U. S. senators chosen by the State, Augustus Caesar Dodge and George Wallace Jones, exhibited a suspiciously pro-Southern bias in Congress. As Herriott pointed out, Dodge and Jones were the only "Northern" senators, save one from Pennsylvania, who could boast voting both against the Wilmot Proviso and for the Fugitive Slave Law in the Compromise of 1850. Furthermore, Jones, born in southern

<sup>2</sup> F. I. Herriott, "Whence Came the Pioneers of Iowa?" *Annals of Iowa*, VII (June, 1906), 458-459.

Indiana, was long a close personal friend of Jefferson Davis and exchanged a warm correspondence with him.

The final, most convincing item of this deductive genre is an excerpt from an 1854 letter which newly-elected Iowa governor, James W. Grimes, wrote to Salmon P. Chase. As edited by Herriott, the governor's letter declared:

The Southern half of our State is strongly pro-slavery, but I think we will be able to carry a majority with us for free principles. . . . The north third of our state will be to Iowa politically what the Western Reserve is to Ohio.<sup>3</sup>

Herriott found this excerpt terribly significant in supporting his thesis. He maintained:

The implications plainly are: first, people of Southern sympathies, if not Southern lineage numerically prevailed in Iowa up to 1856; second, the same was true of Southern Ohio; and third, the opponents of slavery, if they were to win . . . had to depend upon the division of the Southern residents of Iowa.<sup>4</sup>

In short, Herriott claimed that Grimes' letter neatly exemplified the general thesis of early pro-Southern (hence, proslavery) attitudes in Iowa. However, this letter and the other foregoing deductive proofs of the established thesis were used only because census reports during those early years did not include information on the section of nativity of Iowa's citizenry. But from 1850 to 1860 such information was recorded, and Herriott did extensive research to compile that data.

Since the decade 1850-1860 supposedly witnessed the transition from proslavery to antislavery attitudes, and since established historiography holds that shifting immigration patterns determined that transition, then the natural expectation is that the census materials for those years indicate a steady decline in the percentage of Southern-born or Southern-oriented residents in Iowa, and, conversely, a steady rise in Eastern and Northeastern elements. This is exactly what Herriott found.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 462.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



Table 1

Area of Nativity	Population By Year			Percentage By Year		
	1850	1856	1860	1850	1856	1860
New England	5,535	18,389	25,040	3.3	4.4	4.5
Middle States	24,516	85,196	103,173	14.4	20.1	18.3
Southern States	30,954	54,942	54,006	18.1	12.9	9.5
Northwest States	57,078	172,303	193,005	34.6	40.7	33.9
Iowa	50,380	93,302	191,148	29.5	21.9	33.8
Other	138	122	2,460	0.1	0.0	0.0
Totals	170,621	424,254	568,832	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Nativity of Native Born Pioneers To Iowa<sup>5</sup>**

As seen from Herriott's compilations, the Southern-born population dropped from 18.1 percent to 9.5 percent of Iowa's total population between 1850 and 1860. By the same token, the percentage of New England and Middle State natives in the new State rose, as expected, from 17.7 per cent to 22.8 percent in the same ten year period.

This, then, rested the case for established historiography. It contended that since Southern-born natives would logically bring proslavery biases to Iowa when they came, then the State was initially proslavery since deductive evidence points to a Southern-oriented citizenry prior to 1850. It maintained that Iowa shifted gradually to an antislavery stance as new waves of immigrants from the East displaced the older Southern element, and Herriott's census compilations appear to back that contention. On the whole, the thesis seems cogent, logical and well documented.

Yet there exists a certain tenuousness to this thesis. First, a cursory glance at antebellum Iowa history reveals events and situations which stand in glaring contradiction to the accepted work. The evidence offered by Herriott, Sibley and company is itself open to criticism.

A closer look at the census information reveals certain figures which refuse to fit neatly into the pattern suggested by the accepted thesis. New Englanders, the group logically expected to exercise the greatest antislavery influence in Iowa, were never a significant proportion of the population. In the transition decade, 1850-1860, their percentage

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 464.



rose only 1.2 percent, from 3.3 percent to 415 percent. The next most strident group would probably hail from the Middle States, and that element increased its influence only about four percent—from 14.4 percent to 18.1 percent. Lastly, the 8.6 percent drop in the Southern-born segment of Iowa's population was made up not only by a growing Eastern immigration, but by the rising proportion of native Iowans.

This re-examination of Herriott's work does not negate his entire thesis. However, it does suggest the need to avoid a blind acceptance of it, and it also indicates that the deductive evidence might stand closer inspection as well.

As to the States of nativity of Iowa's first delegates to the Wisconsin Assembly, there is no question. However, the unfortunate absence of all records concerning the selection of those men demands that some caution be exercised in drawing conclusions from that selection. While logic presupposes that a sectionally fragmented population, as Iowa undoubtedly had in 1836, would likely choose representatives who reflected its own background, such a presupposition has its weaknesses. For example, two of the 18 assemblymen chosen were from Ireland, but it is a bit far-fetched to assume that Iowa was one-ninth Irish in 1836.

Then there is the matter of the three territorial governors. Iowa Territory's first two chief executives, Robert Lucas and John Chambers, were indeed Southerners. But again the implications drawn from this fact are open to criticism. These men were the political appointees of the Presidents under whom they served. The established historiography submitted no evidence that any of the governors received his appointment because the President wanted to give Iowa a chief executive who reflected its population make-up.

On the question of the congressional records of Senators A. C. Dodge and George Jones, the accepted historians stand even more plainly exposed to rebuttal. It is true

that the two senators voted for proposals generally favorable to the South, but they did so for reasons totally divorced from proslavery convictions on their part. Neither made any secret of his antislavery beliefs.

In the June 17 debate on the Compromise of 1850, Dodge spoke out in the Senate Chamber:

If destiny should chance, some years hence, to translate [my slave-owning colleague] and myself to the plains of Utah or New Mexico when the question comes up of their admission as States into the Union, and should he be in favor of slavery, I shall be found fighting on the stump and in the press against slavery.<sup>6</sup>

A few days later Jones reiterated almost verbatim the sentiments expressed by his fellow Iowan:

I am now, as I have ever been, opposed to [slavery]: by which I mean that in any State or Territory where that question is to be decided, were I to be a resident, no man would be more decided in his opposition to its establishment than I would be.<sup>7</sup>

Neither of these passages allows much chance of mistaking the speaker as a proslavery advocate.

Criticism of the work of established historians indicates flaws in those foregoing studies, and suggests the possible need of revisionism. To do so requires the presentation of hard evidence which contradicts existing historiography. Such evidence does exist. This documented material not only tends to refute the contention that Southerners dominated early Iowa settlement, but it also hits directly at the basic axiom underlying the entire traditional thesis, that Southern-oriented immigrants were by definition proslavery.

Research actually indicates that many immigrants coming out of slave States saw Iowa as a haven from a system they despised. They did not bring home-grown proslavery sentiments with them, but precisely the opposite convictions. Early pioneers like the Salem Quakers, David Rorer and James C. Jordan are but a few representatives of this Southern-born antislavery element.

<sup>6</sup> *Appendix to the Congressional Globe For the First Session of the Thirty-first Congress* (Washington: John C. Rives, 1850), Vol. XIX, Part 1, 910.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1716.

The Quaker settlement of Salem sprang up in South-eastern Iowa in 1835. Founded by Virginia Friends who had come to the State expressly to escape contact with the institution of slavery, the little town early demonstrated its convictions by forcing a slave-owning brother to dispose of his human property. Although the entire population of the village was apparently imbued with antislavery sentiments, a segment of the citizenry opted for a greater militancy than its brethren by opening a depot on the famed Underground Railroad.

Attorney David Rorer is another example of antislavery attitudes driving a Southern-born emigrant to Iowa's free soil. Also born and raised in Virginia, Rorer practiced law in Arkansas and was an admitted slave-owner there. In the fall of 1835, however, he freed—not sold—his slaves and set out for Iowa. As an attorney in his new home, Rorer eventually served as counsellor in two of the State's most famous fugitive slave cases.

Des Moines' future State Senator, James C. Jordan, gave the most militant expression to antislavery sentiment in the Southern-born segment of Iowa's population. Another Virginian, Jordan spent his early years as a professional slave-catcher, tracking down and returning fugitive slaves. These activities so disgusted him that once in Iowa he did a complete about-face and became chief conductor on the Polk county branch of the Underground Railroad.

While the above Southerners were clearly antislavery in attitude, census reports would list them merely as slave-state immigrants. No chapter in those statistical volumes devoted itself to cataloguing a people's convictions.

So then, the foregoing historiography stands not only criticized but partially contradicted. However, beyond contradicting the established thesis there exists the larger challenge of determining just what course Iowa did take on the slavery question. Only a general review of the State's entire antebellum response to the institution can answer that question properly. From such a review, a pattern emerges which not only explains Iowa's evolving attitudes



on the disruptive controversy, but also resolves the apparent contradictions which arise from the various incidents of the State's history relating to slavery.

Comprehensive research indicates that Iowa's population did not shift from proslavery to antislavery leanings, but was imbued from the first with basic feelings of hostility to the system. What the established historiography mistook for early proslavery sentiment was actually a desire to escape involvement in the controversy, coupled with a determination to abide by Constitutional dictates and ease sectional hostilities.

#### THE ERA OF ESCAPISM: 1833-1854

The Senator from Louisiana lives near the mouth of the great river of the West, and I many miles above him, on the same river. It is due to candor that I should tell him I am against his black boys—that is, I want none of them, nor anything to do with them. But sir, just so far as they have entered into the Constitution of the United States, and so far as they enter into the question of State rights and sovereignty of the people, I am for them; I am for enacting just such laws as will hold the Senator and myself together as friends in all times to come.<sup>8</sup>

With these words, Iowa's Senator A. C. Dodge justified his impending affirmative vote on the various acts which would embody the Compromise of 1850. The statement is undoubtedly the clearest and most concise condensation of his State's governing attitude which could possibly be found in one place. It neatly summarized every facet of the corporate sentiments of pre-1854 Iowa. All the threads are there and can be precisely enumerated: the desire to escape from dealing with slavery and Blacks, a conscientious determination to abide by Constitutional dictates and an almost obsessive desire to conciliate and soothe ruffled Southern sensibilities. It is perhaps symbolic that this revealing pronouncement should have been issued during the Compromise debates. A review of those pre-1854 episodes which touched upon slavery and the Negro illustrates fully how that triad of attitudes, escapism, Constitutionalism and conciliation, motivated Iowa's response in each instance.

In the annals of "official" Iowa during her territorial

<sup>8</sup> *Congressional Globe*, *op. cit.*, p. 910.



period, three events occurred which give indications of the State's slavery sentiments. While two of these three support the revisionist opinion that the new frontier district was basically antislavery, the third is substance for established historiography. This latter example of supposedly proslavery thinking on the official level was the passage in the Territorial Assembly of Iowa's first and only Black Code.

Entitled "An Act to Regulate Blacks and Mulattoes," the Code cleared the fledgling territorial legislature on Jan. 21, 1839, seven months after Iowa had become an independent political entity. It first provided that no Black or mulatto could reside in the territory without possessing a court certificate attesting to his freedom and posting a \$500 bond to assure that he would not become a criminal or a county charge. Then it declared that any Negro or mulatto who failed to post bond could be hired out by the county for six months, and the money derived then be applied to the bond.

Section 5 of the Code secured any slaveholder traveling through the territory from loss of his property, and Section 6 allowed any person claiming ownership of a Negro or mulatto simply to give proof of his claim before a judge or justice of the peace in order to have the Black arrested and delivered to the claimant. These last two articles were to be of decisive importance in a subsequent action involving official Iowa in the slavery controversy, namely the Ralph Case argued before the Territorial Supreme Court.

The Black Code, the final analysis, was probably not the result of proslavery leanings in the Iowa legislature. It is much more likely that a native sense of racism influenced the passage of the repressive law. The significant point in all this is the realization that racism and proslavery sentiments were not necessarily identical.

The "Ralph Case" occurred almost simultaneously with the passage of the Black Code by Iowa, and was just as highly significant in illuminating official slavery attitudes. In the early 1830s, a Missouri slave-owner named Montgomery had allowed one of his slaves, known only as Ralph, to come to Iowa and work in the lead mines at Dubuque.

An agreement between the two provided that Ralph would save enough from his wages to gradually purchase his freedom. However, the slave could barely earn enough to keep body and soul together, and he naturally forfeited the payments to his master. By 1838 Montgomery had lost patience and hired two slave-catchers to come to Iowa and retrieve his reneging property. The stage was set for a landmark legal battle.

When the news of Ralph's arrest became known, an antislavery Irishman named Alexander Butterworth hurried to obtain a writ of habeas corpus to halt the extradition. The case was soon brought before Thomas S. Wilson, Judge of the District Court of Dubuque and Associate Justice of the Territorial Supreme Court. Apparently sensing the importance of the case for future decisions, Wilson transferred the hearing to a full seating of the Supreme Court the following summer. In July 1839, the Black miner stood before the imposing bench of Chief Justice Charles Mason and his two colleagues.



**David Rorer**

Although how he came to be involved in the case is unknown, the man representing Ralph was the former Arkansas slave owner, David Rorer. The defense he offered was most inflammatory for a territory which established historians would label proslavery. In addition to certain legal arguments, Rorer maintained:

The claimant [Montgomery] cannot possess any natural right to remove the petitioner to where he may, by the aid of human law, be reduced again to slavery—for such a state is declared to be “repugnant to reason and the principles of Natural Law.” (See *Blac. Com.* Vol. 1st, p. 423.) And still stronger is the language of much earlier and higher authority;—in the divine writings of Moses, it is said, “Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee.” (22nd chap. Deut. 15th verse.)<sup>9</sup>

Footnote No. 9 appears on page 356.

When the evidence was all in, the Court delivered a unanimous decision. As written by Chief Justice Mason, the tribunal ruled that Ralph should be set free. The justices agreed with Rorer that the Black Iowan had been given permission to come to the free-soil territory and therefore could not be classified as a fugitive slave. Then, if not a fugitive, the Missouri Compromise's ban on slavery in Iowa disallowed any other chance of Montgomery's recovering his slave. As for the Black Code's provision that a Negro post a certificate of freedom and a \$500 bond, Rorer reasoned successfully that Ralph's residence in Iowa prior to the Code's passage relieved him of that responsibility.

The legal liberation of Ralph is perhaps more than locally interesting because of the remarkable similarity in form to the Dred Scott appeal before the U. S. Supreme Court 18 years later. Significantly, Iowa's judiciary ruled in the slave's favor whereas the national court did not. This fact alone helps to augment the contention that early Iowa gave substantial evidence of antislavery leanings.

To be completely fair to established historiography, it should be noted that at the time of the Ralph decision there was a serious confrontation between Iowa and Missouri over the boundary between them. It is possible to argue that the Iowa court's ruling may have represented nothing more than a desire to deprive a Missourian of his property. However, such motivation does not become judicial robes, and the tribunal would be expected to act accordingly. But more importantly, the boundary dispute had not yet reached its peak of intensity, and, furthermore, Congress was even then intervening to settle it.

Perhaps a more logical argument against accepting the Ralph Case as indicative of a widespread antislavery sentiment in Iowa could be made if one maintained that the court's decision merely represented the thinking of a three-man minority which happened to occupy a locus of power. This line of reasoning would hold that the Black

<sup>9</sup> Easton Morris (ed.), *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Iowa, Volume I, 1838-1846* (Iowa City: Silas Foster, 1847), p. 3.



Code more accurately indicated official and, probably, unofficial attitudes in early Iowa since the Code was the result of an elected, and therefore representative, assembly.

However, if one is seeking antislavery expressions in an elected body, it is only necessary to look forward five years to the debates in the Constitutional Convention of 1844. This elected assembly met to draft a document which would usher Iowa into Statehood. If the delegates selected by their fellow citizens can be considered representative, then their actions relative to the place of the Black in the State were revealing.

Proceedings opened in Iowa City in the summer of 1844, and from the beginning, a surprisingly liberal spirit was evident. One of the first questions raised in the Convention concerned the status of the Negro. Certain unknown delegates had boldly issued a petition to grant the Black man in Iowa full citizenship—including suffrage. Significantly, this audacious step, occurring just five years after the passage of the Black Code, was received as a legitimate subject of debate. The Assembly appointed a committee to deliberate upon the question and recommend action. The actual decision of that committee was probably a foregone conclusion, but the obvious honesty and candor of its report tells much about the attitudes of early Iowa on the whole Black problem.

The committee allowed that all men were created equal, and that the concept should apply to Blacks as well as whites; however, the foregoing was

a mere abstract proposition, and, although strictly true, when applied to man in a state of nature, yet it becomes very much modified when man is considered in the artificial state in which government and society places him.<sup>10</sup>

Holding the Convention to be an attempt by the white population to form a State government and that the members should view it in terms of white self-interest, the committee asked, "Can the negro (*sic*) be admitted to

<sup>10</sup> *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of 1844* (Iowa City: Jesse Williams, 1845), p. 52.



those privileges (of political citizenship) and not impair the rights of whites?"<sup>11</sup> The decision it reached maintained that, "the negro (*sic*) not being a party to the government has not right to partake of its privileges."<sup>12</sup>

One might say that all this moral philosophizing was irrelevant since the egalitarian and legalizing verbiage served simply as a preamble to an expression of racism and proslavery attitudes. But that the petition to grant Black suffrage came to the floor and that the Convention felt called upon to respond seems highly significant, for a racist Assembly would have been better advised to ignore the whole issue. It cannot be too strongly noted that the whole tenor of the committee report was an open repudiation of the concept of inherent Black inferiority. It viewed the denial of citizenship to Negroes as an unfortunate, but necessary step to preserve the prerogatives of whites—a position candidly admitted in the highly illuminating statement which closed the report:

However your committee may commiserate with the degraded condition of the negroes (*sic*) and feel for his fate, yet we can never consent to open the doors of our beautiful State and invite him to settle in our lands. The policy of the other States would drive the whole black population of the Union upon us.<sup>13</sup>

This excerpt rivals Dodge's statement in the clarity with which it delineates the mood of escapism prevalent in early Iowa. The committee admitted certain antislavery leanings, and even a liberal sympathy with the plight of the Black freeman but it so strongly desired non-involvement in the controversy that it refused to allow political expression to its more humanitarian tendencies. The Constitution adopted by the Assembly in the summer of 1844 made citizenship a "whites only" proposition.

The voters of Iowa twice rejected this Constitution—once on April 7, 1845, and again on August 4 of that year. Neither

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

slavery nor racism had anything to do with those rejections, however. Finally, in the summer of 1846, another convention assembled at Iowa City to prepare a second constitution. This time the delegates did not even admit the question of Black citizenship as a topic of debate.

The voters ratified this second constitution in December 1846, and Iowa became a State. Statehood, however, while representing a change in political status for Iowans, had little or no effect on popular attitudes. Most citizens of the fledgling State held devoutly to their position of philosophic antislavery paradoxically expressed by "head-in-the-sand" escapism.

Through all this period of disengagement, a foundation of hostility to slavery was being established. A minute but flourishing segment of the State's population disavowed the timidity of its fellow citizens and promoted an open defiance of the Southern institution. Not surprisingly, this vocal element in Iowa came largely from the religious community.

An example of this religious element was the previously mentioned village of Salem. Founded in 1835 by a group of Virginia Friends, the little town had always abhorred human bondage, but in 1837, a family came to Salem who put its beliefs constantly to the test. This was the Frazier family, led by their dynamic patriarch, Thomas Clarkson Frazier. These new settlers were not satisfied with meekly expressing antislavery sentiments. By 1845 the stridence with which they maintained their militancy had polarized the town into two camps, both hostile to slavery, but in turn, hostile to each other. As a result of this schism, the town elders expelled the Frazier faction from the community meeting house and forced them to set up their own church and burial ground.

The expulsion merely gave the Frazier group more freedom with which to pursue their aims, and Salem's proximity to the Missouri border predetermined the obvious course of antislavery expression open to the militants—involvement in the Underground Railroad. The record of their participation in this famous system was one of the earliest in the State.



**Asa Turner**

antislavery militancy. In Denmark he, like the Fraziers, opened one of the State's first stations on the Underground Railroad.

The abolitionist parson was clearly the head of Congregational councils in Iowa, even after that denomination had sent several other strong-willed ministers into the Territory. As leader of the church, Turner used his influence to bring his brethren into the battle against slavery. In 1840 the Congregational Church in the Territory formed the Iowa Association to function as its policy-making and administrative arm. The first meeting took place in Denmark under Turner's chairmanship.

Following the organizational meeting of 1840, the Association turned to regular business at the Second Annual Meeting in 1841. One of its first decisions was to attack Iowa's recently passed Black Code. On November 6, the Committee on the Religious Destitution of the Territory, headed by Turner, reported out the following resolution:

WHEREAS: the laws in relation to blacks and mulattoes are in our opinion a violation of the principles of justice and the laws of God; oppressive in their operation on colored persons, and forbidding us arts of humanity; therefore,

RESOLVED: that we invite our churches to unite with us in petitioning for their repeal.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> J. B. Chase (register), *Minutes of the General Association of Congregational Churches and Ministers of the State of Iowa: 1840-1875* (Hull, Iowa: Advance Print, 1888), p. 9.



Almost as though the implications inherent in the 1841 resolution were not a sufficiently explicit pronouncement of antislavery sentiments, Turner led the Iowa Association one step further. On Sept. 15, 1843, during the Fourth Annual Meeting, he chaired a Committee on Slavery which declared:

We regard slavery, as it exists in this country, as a heinous sin, and a gross violation of the laws and Gospel of Christ. . . . We would call upon our fellow Christians of every name to unite with us to do away with legalized oppression, and lead man to love his fellow man. . . . We also feel bound in duty to withdraw fellowship from those who profess to be Christians, and still hold their fellowmen in bondage.<sup>15</sup>

This "withdrawal of fellowship" is reminiscent of Salem's coercing its slaveholding brother into selling his property. Both cases were far in advance of their time and represent a brand of militancy not quite palatable for most Iowans of that day. But that militancy did exist, and the number who subscribed to it grew steadily.

Of this subtly growing element of antislavery militants the most easily recognizable was the famous "Iowa Band." This group of 11 graduating students from Andover Theological Seminary had decided to come West to begin their Congregational ministries, as they felt they were most needed there. Praying for guidance, the pilgrims "heard a call" to the farthest frontier settlements. Dismissing such possibilities as Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin as too settled, and therefore not in great need, the debate narrowed to Missouri and Iowa. In eliminating the former, the following dialogue purportedly took place:

"Well, then, Missouri," says one.

"But Missouri is a slave state."

"No matter, they need the Gospel there if it is."

"Yes, but if there are places outside of slavery just as needy, why not go where we can labor to the best advantage?"

"Well, Iowa then,—What say you to the new Territory of Iowa."<sup>16</sup>

Most outspoken of the Band was William Salter, Burlington's new pastor. His sentiments showed up from the

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Ephraim Adams, *The Iowa Band* (Chicago: The Pilgrim Press, 1899), p. 12.



pulpit and in his letters. Probably the truest representation of his feelings came in his intense correspondence with his fiancée, Mary Ann MacKintire of Charlestown, Massachusetts.

Written between 1845 and 1846, Salter's letters contain many remarks on the current agitation over the controversy and reveal his deeply troubled mind. He knew where he stood on the question of slavery, but he recognized as well the possible implications of a forceful application of his ideals to his personal life. On Jan. 1, 1846, he wrote Mary Ann that he did not like the monomaniacal self-righteousness of some of his colleagues, noting that "though an abolitionist, God forbid that I should make opinions different from mine a test of ministerial fellowship."<sup>17</sup>

Salter should be classified exactly as he described himself, an abolitionist. Yet there was an element of uncertainty in the young minister which probably typified to some extent the larger mood of Iowa's incoming population. The pioneer land-seekers were simply not that sure of their stand on slavery, or rather they were not sure of the course which their position seemed to demand of them. To avoid taking action, they fled to any haven they could find, and Iowa seemed to suit that purpose.

But where the uncertainty of the settlers expressed itself in escapism, that of Salter and his Congregational colleagues was largely suppressed. Haven-hunting was not their motivation. They came to labor, and for most of them that labor included moral warfare against slavery. In 1848 another New England parson came to Iowa to open a church. The Rev. John Todd, the new pastor of Tabor, a town in the southwest corner of the State, would figure largely in the antislavery movement in Iowa. In his autobiography, Todd recalled his trip up the Missouri River on a steamboat, and the violent denunciation he faced when he told a fellow-passenger "that the slaves in our country had a much better reason for rising and fighting

<sup>17</sup> William Salter Papers (Des Moines: Iowa Historical Library), Vol. II, MacKintire Letters, p. 82.

for their freedom than our fathers ever had."<sup>18</sup> Iowa obviously had another fire-brand on its hands.

This cataloguing of incoming antislavery militants must not be taken as a dominant feature of the State's settlement. The true, determined antislavery movement in Iowa really began in 1854. Prior to that year, the State vacillated between her two overriding desires—to escape and to conciliate. Almost every event touching upon slavery during those years held elements of one or both of these two drives. The greatest single expression of antislavery sentiment in the pre-1854 period, the Salem fugitive slave case, ultimately demonstrated Iowa's dilemma.

Sometime around June 2, 1848, nine slaves owned by a Ruel Daggs of Clark county, Missouri, escaped and made their way north into Iowa. Two slave-catchers named Slaughter and McClure came in hot pursuit, and cornered the runaways in the woods a mile south of Salem. The captors seized their quarry and began retracing their steps toward Missouri when they were stopped by three militant Quakers, Thomas Clarkson Frazier, Elihu Frazier and William Johnson.

One of the three militants demanded that the Negroes be taken to the Justice of the Peace in Salem to be identified as fugitives before being returned to Missouri. Another was more direct, vowing that he would "wade in Missouri blood before the Negroes should be taken."<sup>19</sup> Outnumbered and in a strange State, Slaughter and McClure surrendered to the demand of a court appearance.

While the party advanced toward town, news of their impending arrival somehow preceded them and Salem turned out *en masse*. Slaughter later reported that the town was "unanimous" that he not return the slaves to Daggs. This alone is arresting since the community was supposedly

<sup>18</sup> John Todd, *Early Settlement and Growth of Western Iowa*, or *Reminiscences* (Des Moines: Historical Department of Iowa, 1906), pp. 55-56.

<sup>19</sup> George Frazee (ed.), *Fugitive Slave Case: Ruel Daggs vs. Elihu Frazier et. al.* (Burlington: Morgan and McKenny, 1850), p. 6.

divided between "militants" and "moderates." The townspeople surrounded the slave-catchers, issuing threats and insults, and in the confusion several of the slaves vanished into the crowd.

When the remaining party reached Salem, the office of Justice of the Peace Nelson Gibbs proved too small for the would-be audience. The harried Missourians were forced to face the ultimate irony of having their hearing moved to the Fraziers' spacious Abolition Meeting House. In the tumultuous examination, Slaughter and McClure admitted that they had no warrants while Gibbs finally decided he had no jurisdiction. In the general bedlam another Quaker, Paul Way, led one party of slaves to waiting horses, and Thomas Frazier took those remaining to his home.

The affair at Salem might be misleading, however, since the Quaker village was definitely not representative of Iowa as a whole in 1848. Even Salem's moderates would have been considered militant by the standards of most Iowans. Furthermore, the press of the State was unanimous in its condemnation of the town.

Press censure was not the last chapter in the Daggs affair. In 1850 the slaveowner brought suit in Federal Court at Burlington against those most closely involved in the loss of his slaves. Daggs sought \$10,000 in damages as compensation for his missing chattels. Strangely enough, he chose the avowed antislavery lawyer, David Rorer, to represent him. In defense of the attorney's appearance on the Southern side of the moral issue at this time, it can only be said that Rorer's case for Daggs lacked the vigor and passion of his defense of Ralph. Moreover, he presented Constitutional rather than ethical arguments. The Frazier faction was represented by J. C. Hall and J. T. Morton.

From the beginning the conduct of the trial exhibited a "kid-gloves" approach, an evaluation strengthened by Judge J. J. Dyer's commendation to counsel for handling an explosive suit with dignity and restraint. During the proceedings most witnesses seemed reluctant to take a definite stand on the town's actions, and many maintained that Slaughter and McClure had never documented their claims



at the time. While Hall and Morton hammered home this last point, Rorer just elicited what sketchy testimony he could.

Rorer made no move to counter any defense argument. His case consisted of taking Slaughter's testimony, casually cross-examining a few witnesses, then placing his client's claim before the jury. On sheer merit, there were enough loopholes in the plaintiff's case for any jury with antislavery tendencies to dismiss the suit if they so desired. But this jury did not dismiss it. After two hours of deliberation, they returned with a \$2900 award for Daggs.

It appears that the Burlington jury may have held pro-slavery sympathies. However, Rorer's plea to them offers another interpretation. Like many Iowans, David Rorer had come to free-soil to escape contact with the slavery question. But for the previous four years Iowa had been a State, and she had assumed certain responsibilities to the country. She was bound in law to her fellow States, and shared with them the common heritage of the U. S. Constitution. Much as Rorer might detest slavery and desire to escape it, there came a time, as in the Daggs case, when it forced itself upon the citizenry of the new State. At such times sectional angers flared and antislavery advocates like Rorer were forced to choose between their desire to strike out at a system they abhorred and their desire to preserve the harmony of the Union. Reluctantly, they chose the Union. The moral duty demanded by the Constitution overrode their ethical hostility to slavery. To save the Union from further discord, they chose to placate the South in obedience to the legal contract which united them. Along with Senator Dodge they seemed to say, "Just so far as Blacks have entered into the Constitution we are for them."

Conciliation and constitutionality, then, framed Rorer's whole attack. He candidly told the jury that the facts of the case were patently obvious and there could be no begging the question. Iowans, as citizens of a responsible State, had a duty to live up to their legal contract, the U. S.



Constitution, which they had knowingly accepted. That contract recognized slavery. Placing the decision in clear philosophical perspective for the jury, Rorer asked:

Shall we now repudiate the contract we have made—shall we be the first to violate it? Shall we affirm that there is a moral law above this, and that we must obey it at all hazards? Shall we be permitted to prate about morals and sympathy with canting hypocrits or maddened fanatics, when we ourselves sanctioned the institution of slavery by entering, with full knowledge, into a contract of which it forms a part?<sup>20</sup>

It appears that Rorer recognized a general antislavery feeling in the jury, and that he forced them to see beyond the question of the Daggs claim to the higher legal duty of abiding by the Constitution.

The Daggs decision gave the first indication of how seriously involved Iowa was in the moral dilemma of antislavery versus union. On the local scene the nearness of Missouri gave her the problem of dealing with fugitive slaves. On the national level sectional discord riddled the two chambers of Congress and constantly forced Iowa to take sides. Until 1854 she continued to choose the course of conciliation based upon constitutionality, but it was becoming a progressively less satisfying choice since conciliation only seemed to whet the appetite of sectional interests.

No single piece of national legislation demonstrated Iowa's dilemma more graphically than the *Compromise of 1850*. These enactments were but one more futile effort to soothe sectional hostility and ease tensions. Among other things, the *Compromise* was a series of bills dealing with lands gained in the Mexican War. The *Missouri Compromise* 30 years earlier had set a 36° 30' line between slave and free territory, but extension of that line proved impossible when California applied for admission to Statehood with a free-soil constitution. California lay well below the old compromise line. In the storm of sectional reaction which followed, Henry Clay offered a proposal to end the controversy. California would be accepted on its own terms, which naturally pleased the North; a new and all-encompassing fugitive slave law would be enacted as a concession

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

to the South; and, most importantly, the remainder of the old Mexican Empire would be divided without respect to slavery. In other words, the new territories were to decide on slavery for themselves according to the nature of their settlement. By this concept, dubbed "squatter sovereignty," Clay hoped to short-circuit future sectional hostility over parcelling out land.

The idea of letting the people of the distant western settlements decide the slavery question for themselves naturally satisfied most Iowans. Not only was it democratic, but also the area was geographically far removed from the State so as not to cause concern. The old Wilmot Proviso which sought to ban slavery in the new territories could then be comfortably dismissed. The fugitive slave law was less easy to accept, but Iowa preferred not having runaway Blacks around to bother its conscience, and the new law might discourage Negroes from making the break for freedom. Then too, the new law did no more than update an old one the South had always used. It was a good way to restore harmony in the harried Union, and harmony remained something Iowa wanted most desperately—as the generally favorable press reaction to the Compromise clearly indicated.

Only one ominous note interrupted the general accord on the Compromise. At the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Iowa Association in June 1850, Asa Turner pushed through another "testimony upon slavery" which openly challenged the currently debated fugitive slave law. The Association maintained:

The principles of civil and religious liberty forbid our acknowledging the right of property in man or the obligation of any law requiring us to aid in the delivering up of fugitives from oppression.<sup>21</sup>

This "testimony" all but invited Congregationalists to join the Underground Railroad, an invitation many of the brethren were later to accept.

Finally, there were two more items touching upon Iowa's pre-1854 racial attitudes. In February 1851, the legislature codified existing legal practices into one volume. In

<sup>21</sup> Chase, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

chapter 130, section 2388, on "Evidence," the new code declared that any person capable of understanding the obligation of an oath could give evidence, except that "an Indian, a negro (sic), a mulatto, or a black person shall not be allowed to give testimony in any cause wherein a white person is a party."<sup>22</sup>

The second event occurred in antislavery Tabor, John Todd's pastorate. In 1850 a Negro family named Garner came to town. They were apparently pleasant and industrious people who had worked hard to purchase their freedom, and then had come to a free State to enjoy it. The humanitarian Rev. Todd naively invited the Garners' children to attend both day school and Sunday School, and they cheerfully accepted. At that point the presumptuous cleric learned just how deep Tabor's liberality ran, for, as he described it:

Immediately up bounded the race question, which was soon practically solved by the incendiary burning of the school house, the only place in the entire settlement where either school or meeting could be held.<sup>23</sup>

Neither case, however, involved any particular proslavery sentiment. The Black testimony law represented nothing more than a vestigial carry-over from the racism expressed in the Black Code of 11 years previous. As for the school burning, it was obviously a racist matter since Tabor had a known antislavery reputation.

In total, then, Iowa's pre-1854 history exhibited the conscious desire of its citizenry to escape contact with slavery and the Negro, despite basic antislavery learnings. Iowans therefore resented abolitionists because they interfered with this escapism. Yet when forced to come to grips with the Black problem, Iowa was ethically torn. Where possible, the state would prefer expressing its more humanitarian side, but if pushed too far it would safely align itself with the forces of conciliation and legality—even against the urgings of its conscience.

<sup>22</sup> *The Code of Iowa, 1851* (Iowa City: Palmer and Paul, State Printers, 1851; reprint Des Moines: Emery H. English, State Printer, 1912), p. 239.

<sup>23</sup> Todd, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91.



Conciliation proved an inadequate course in the long run. It had a way of demanding more and more of the soul of antislavery Iowans. When the Kansas-Nebraska Bill went before the Congress of the United States, the whole foundation upon which Iowa had built its escapist haven crumbled. The Missouri Compromise was repealed and Iowa felt betrayed.

#### KANSAS-NEBRASKA AND JAMES GRIMES: THE TURNING POINT

In one of those rare examples of historical irony, Iowa's conciliatory Senator A. C. Dodge opened the door on the act which ended his State's uneasy aloofness toward the slavery question. At the same time he unleashed the forces at home which were to topple him from his premier position on the political ladder of Iowa. Oddly enough, Dodge had no notion of what lay ahead and was stigmatized by a situation which simply got beyond his control.

On Dec. 14, 1853, Iowa's senior senator introduced a bill to organize the Territory of Nebraska. This had long been one of the dearest projects of Dodge's fellow-Democrat and political ally, Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois. Yet it was natural that an Iowan should introduce the bill, since it would put civilization on his State's western border and end the War Department's policy of using the area as a repository for Indians. Also, since Douglas dreamed of putting a railroad through that area, Dodge knew that Iowa would likewise be crossed by the route. However, Douglas' objective had always eluded him because of the concerted opposition of the South. They naturally wanted no part of another free-state in the Union, as the Missouri Compromise provided that Nebraska should be. Also, Southerners wanted any American expansion, especially railroads, directed toward the Southwest.

All evidence pointed to Dodge's bill meeting the same fate as all his colleague's attempts, but this time Douglas moved to stymie Southern objections by offering them a proposition they could not refuse. From his position as

Chairman of the Committee on Territories, the Illinois Senator revised Dodge's bill so that it came out with an article allowing squatter sovereignty on the slavery issue to be applied to certain areas of the Louisiana Purchase. Specifically, it proposed the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and offered slave-owners access to the newly-created Nebraska and Kansas Territories with their human chattel. As a result, these areas would be open to the expansion of the slave system just as the old Mexican lands had been by the passage of the Compromise of 1850. In short, the Kansas-Nebraska Bill merely sought to extend the previous compromise, and all the rhetorical moralizing about the sovereignty of the people which Clay's bill had elicited applied equally to Douglas' proposal.

When Iowa had chosen to be conciliatory and support the Compromise of 1850, it had done so knowing that squatter sovereignty might conceivably allow for the expansion of slavery into new but distant territory. However, if slavery spread to the Southwest, at least it would not intrude upon Iowa's aloofness from the problem, and perhaps it would quiet the incessant sectional bickering.

Whatever Iowa's earlier ambivalence, the whole structure of moral non-involvement came tumbling down when Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act in May 1854. Now the free-state might very possibly find slavery on two of its borders instead of one. All that its conciliation of the South had accomplished was to forge the weapon whereby the South had destroyed the main prop of Iowa's isolation, the Missouri Compromise line. Missouri's runaway slaves had already intruded upon Iowa's uneasy conscience; a slave-state to the west would make confrontation inescapable. It was little wonder that the free-state population felt betrayed. With the old compromise repealed, there was nothing but Iowa's own amendable constitution to keep slavery from entering the State itself. Few Iowans probably took such an eventuality seriously, yet such was their anger that they listened willingly to leading political figures who sounded the alarm over the possibility.

The State responded immediately to the bill's passage

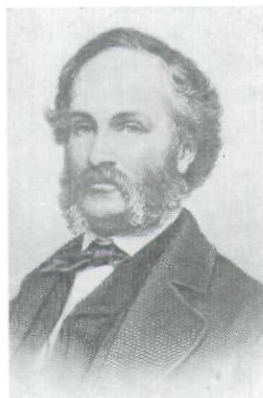
by entering into the slavery controversy with vengeance. The same Iowa which had given a slaveowner a favorable judgment against some of its own citizens, which had codified an anti-Negro testimony provision and which had endorsed a compromise supposedly congenial to slave interests, would no longer play the constitutionalist appeaser. The State had gone against its inherent antislavery conscience and was now expected to watch the system move into the house next door. This time Iowans would have none of it. They would fight back, and even legality would not overly concern them.

This new strident militancy, aroused by Kansas-Nebraska, did not result from any dramatic shift in population make-up over the four year span between 1850 and 1854. Rather Iowa's natural antislavery tendencies surfaced behind the repudiation of constitutional restraint. Iowans had tried to fulfill their moral duty to their national contract, but in doing so, they had netted nothing. Now, with the pragmatic spur of self-interest in regard to the settlement of their neighboring territories, they would set aside fine points of constitutionality and listen more sympathetically to the arguments of native antislavery advocates, whether they spoke from the press or the pulpit.

Finding Iowa's press largely ranged against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and most Iowans up in arms, it was inevitable that someone would make political capital of the situation, especially since 1854 was an election year. With the Democratic Party so closely tied to the hated piece of legislation, eyes naturally turned to the Whigs. Always a minority party in the State, the Whigs had been crushed in the election of 1852. Kansas-Nebraska gave them a chance to "come out of the political wilderness," and they took advantage of it. Ironically, the election of 1854 also witnessed the party's demise, for within two years their "Moses" had defected to the new Republican camp and had taken the State with him. This young Moses was the intense, antislavery lawyer from Burlington, James W. Grimes.



In early February 1854, during the debate of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill in Congress, the Whig Party of Iowa held its largest political convention. Casting aside the old faces of the party, the assembly chose instead the articulate Grimes. Douglas' act would be the central issue of the campaign, and Grimes rarely deviated from that course. From the time he climbed on the stump until he left the State House for the U. S. Senate in 1857, the Kansas question consumed his energies.



James Grimes

But Grimes was to be more than a Whig candidate—a fact which may partly explain his defection to the Republicans. Many Whigs were unable to condone his more militant antislavery positions, and could not back him strongly. Almost at once, Grimes began seeking out like-minded men. William Penn Clarke, a devoted antislavery advocate, became one of the first to ally himself to his party's candidate in a closer bond than political necessity would demand. Grimes wrote specifically for his help on April 3, 1854, and Clarke quickly responded. Others, like D. C. Cloud and J. W. Cattell also joined the growing coterie, their unbending antislavery philosophy uniting them all.

However, these men would have joined Grimes' campaign in any case. More important was the alliance he formed with the Denmark cleric, Asa Turner, who had emerged over the years as one of the leading figures in the Free Soil Party of Iowa. The party was small but morally influential in the State, and its support would mean a good deal to the Whig nominee.

On March 28, 1854, the Free Soil Convention opened in Crawfordsville with Denmark's Isaac Field presiding. Turner's confidant and future biographer, George Magoun, attended the convention with the parson and recorded the proceedings. He described the conclave as both troubled and tumultuous. Grimes' nomination by the Whigs had stolen

Free Soil thunder, yet they were not completely satisfied as to his antislavery credentials. While the confused debate rumbled on, Turner, who had been appointed chairman of the platform committee, busied himself drafting the solution to the whole problem. The platform he submitted was probably one of the most succinct on record:

Whereas: (1) the Nebraska bill is the great question of national politics, and

Whereas: (2) the Maine Law [a prohibition act] is the great question of state politics; therefore

Resolved: that we will vote for James W. Grimes of Des Moines County for governor.<sup>24</sup>

The Free Soil Party gave the Whig lawyer its endorsement. Thus, with one convulsive upheaval, the Kansas-Nebraska Act had totally realigned politics in Iowa. Though still marching under old political banners, the new orders in Iowa were actually made up of free-soil and antislavery adherents ranged against a confused and uncomfortable agglomeration of proslavers and old-line conciliators.

On April 8, 1854, Grimes issued a broadside explaining his position in the coming campaign. The broadside is one of Iowa's most remarkable historical documents. It opened by noting that, should the Missouri Compromise be repealed, both Kansas and Nebraska would be flooded with slaveholders. Then came a most significant appraisal of Iowa's situation:

If there is one State in the Union more interested than another in the maintenance of the Missouri Compromise, it is the State of Iowa. With a free, enterprising population on the west, our State will be vastly benefited by an early organization of Nebraska. With a slave State on our western border, I see nothing but trouble and darkness in the future. Bounded on two sides by slave States, we shall be intersected with underground railroads, and shall be continually distracted by slave-hunts. Instead of having a population at the west who will sympathize with us, we shall find their sympathies and interests constantly antagonistic to ours.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> George F. Magoun, *Asa Turner: A Home Missionary Patriarch and His Times* (Chicago: Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Company, 1899), p. 160.

<sup>25</sup> Salter Papers, *op. cit.*, Vol. II.

But perhaps the most significant section of the whole broadside came in his brusque dismissal of the charge that he was an abolitionist:

I am aware that for entertaining these opinions of the Nebraska question, and for fearlessly expressing them, I am denounced in some quarters as an abolitionist. I heed not the senseless charge. It is too late in the day for any man to be deterred from expressing his opinions by the mad-dog cry of abolitionism. I do not attempt or desire to interfere with slavery in the slave-holding States. I am content that the slave-holders of the South may possess their slaves, and be responsible for their control over them to their own laws, and to their own consciences. I will not even presume to judge them. But, with the blessing of God, I will war and war continually against the abandonment to slavery of a single foot of soil now consecrated to freedom. . . . And I here declare that whilst I am as anxious as any man, for the speedy organization of the new Territories, yet I will not only everywhere and at all times oppose their organization under a bill allowing the introduction of slavery, but should the present bill pass, I will advocate its repeal and oppose the admission of Nebraska and Kansas into the Union as slave states.<sup>26</sup>

Though Grimes denied being an abolitionist, the fact remains that the charge did not particularly disturb him. Also, the broadside firmly established a position which Iowa officially adopted from that point right on down to the Civil War—"slavery where it exists, but not one inch further." More importantly, this pronouncement was the first by a major political figure in Iowa to imply an open abhorrance of slavery.

If Grimes' statements occasionally sound rather paranoid, it can only be said that tensions ran high and that such declarations merely reflected those tensions. Beyond that there is the fact that some of his more flamboyant predictions proved surprisingly prophetic. For example, at the time there would probably have been many scoffers at the notion that Iowa would become "intersected with underground railroads;" yet that is precisely what happened. Prior to 1854 hostility to the return of fugitive slaves centered mainly in Quaker Salem and Yankee Denmark, at least in so far as the later admissions of involved personnel indicate such hostility. Even in those towns the URR

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



activity was unspecific and undocumented, with the exception of the Daggs case. But 1854 was the year of decision. Every county history with URR activity to record, dates the opening of its stations at that year or just after it. Because 1854 is so recurrent, it defies coincidence.

In November of this pivotal year, Grimes carried the State, and his Whig-Free Soil coalition took a majority into the State assembly. On Dec. 9, 1854, he gave his inaugural address before the new legislature. His speech clarified his basic hostility both to slavery and to the implications of the Kansas-Nebraska Act:

Slavery is a local institution, depending wholly on State laws for its existence and continuance. Freedom being the natural condition of all men, and no authority being delegated to the General Government to establish or protect slavery, Congress can pass no law establishing or protecting it in the territories.<sup>27</sup>

The new governor of Iowa was definitely sincere about his antislavery leanings, and proclaimed himself a force to contend with in the future.

Grimes was somewhat more militant than even his public pronouncements revealed him to be—perhaps even militant enough to be classed as an abolitionist. For several years the Burlington lawyer-politician had carried on an extensive correspondence with Salmon P. Chase. Included in this exchange was that highly provocative letter excerpted by Herriott which purported to demonstrate a large element of proslavery sentiment in Iowa.

On Oct. 3, 1854, Grimes did indeed write Chase that he believed that, "The Southern half of our State is strongly proslavery. . . ."<sup>28</sup> But the impact of this peculiar statement is ameliorated by two considerations: first, Grimes wrote the letter just prior to his election as governor on an unconditional free-soil platform; and secondly, when taken as a whole the letter reveals a condition in the State exactly the opposite of what the carefully edited excerpt portrays:

<sup>27</sup> William Salter, *The Life of James W. Grimes, With His Collected Correspondence* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1876), p. 61.

<sup>28</sup> Herriott, *op. cit.*, p. 462.

The southern half of our State is strongly proslavery, but I think we will be able to carry a majority with us for free principles, and for a disconnection with slavery. The Whigs are just now learning that it does not hurt them to be called "abolitionists," "wooly-heads," etc., and, when the great contest of 1856 comes on, they will be prepared for and callous to such epithets. The north third of our State will be to Iowa, politically, what the Western Reserve is to the State of Ohio. No man can obtain the electoral vote of Iowa, in 1856, who was in favor of the passage of the Nebraska bill, and who will not favor the repeal of the "Fugitive Slave Law."<sup>29</sup>

In its entirety, this ambiguous letter, rather than indicating a substantial proslavery sentiment in Iowa, reveals a majority for the opposing position. One can only wonder if Grimes' use of the term proslavery did not refer to someone not quite as militant as himself.

On Nov. 13, 1854, Chase answered Grimes' letter, and in doing so he showed plainly that he thought the Iowan to be something more than a moderate free-soiler:

It does me good to think that a New Hampshire boy (N. H. was the native State of both Grimes and Chase), and a governor of a Western State, will have the honor of being the first to lay down the great principle on which the slavery question must be finally settled, if peacefully settled at all.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, Chase was thinking the unthinkable — that the confrontation between slavery and freedom might necessarily become violent. It is significant that he should share these thoughts with Grimes, and that doing so did not seem to bother the Iowan or cool his alliance with his Ohio mentor.

Chase was ultimately correct, the confrontation would be violent. But Bull Run was not really the first bloody field of the "irrepressible conflict;" rather the plains of Kansas were to have that dubious honor. When it was evident that slavery and antislavery would battle for supremacy in the Kansas Territory, Iowa stood hopelessly in the middle. As Missouri became the natural highway of the slavocracy into the contested area, so Iowa hosted the anti-slavery migration. And there, willingly in the thick of it, was Iowa's James W. Grimes. His name would head the roster of political leaders in the great free-soil movement.

<sup>29</sup> Salter, *Grimes, op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

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